

COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM

Background of the Invention

The present invention relates to the field of synchronous hierarchy communications networks, for example synchronous digital hierarchy (SDH) and SONET networks and to the synchronisation of network elements within such networks.

A synchronous hierarchy communications network comprises a number of interconnected nodes or network elements (NE), e.g. SDH equipment (SE), arranged to exchange data, synchronisation and control signalling according to a synchronous hierarchy, as set out for example in the synchronous digital hierarchy (SDH) or SONET standards. Typically a synchronisation signal will be passed from one NE to the next, along with the data signal, so creating a synchronisation path through communicating NEs via data ports. The synchronisation is carried by virtue of the synchronisation signal's aggregate bit rate rather than the data it contains. The signal also carries the synchronisation status message (SSM).

For brevity in the following the invention will be described with reference to SDH, it being understood that the invention is also applicable to SONET. A significant feature of SDH systems is the ability of networks to automatically recover from synchronisation failures. To support this feature each SE requires a pre-configured synchronisation source priority table and each synchronisation signal must carry an indication of the quality of the timing source from which it is derived. In SDH networks, this indication of quality is carried in the SSM. For any one STM-N output, the SE will autonomously select from

the SSM values of the available sources the one with the highest quality. The selection of which source to use to synchronise data signals sent out from STM-N ports of an SE is also controlled by the pre-configured priority table of that equipment. For any one STM-N output, one or a number of synchronisation sources can each be assigned a priority and the SE can use the priority table to identify the source with the highest priority. In practice priority is only used to select a synchronisation source if there are more than one available with the same, highest quality, or if a valid SSM is not available.

At a network level it is important that the overall trail of successive synchronisation sources (which may be described as a “daisy chain” of SEs passing synchronisation information from one to the other along the chain) always refers back to a designated external source. This is illustrated in Figure 1. It is also important that every effort is made to prevent a timing loop occurring. A timing loop occurs when a synchronisation signal transmitted by a SE is returned (i.e. looped-back) to the same SE which then selects that looped-back synchronisation signal as its source for transmitting thus “closing the loop” such that there is no independent external source of synchronisation. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

To avoid this situation, international standards (e.g. pr ETS 300 417-6-1) define a method whereby, when a synchronisation source input to a SE via a particular port is selected for onward transmission by that SE, the SSM sent out by that particular port is set to “do not use” (DNU). A synchronisation signal with an associated SSM of DNU will not be used. This ensures that a synchronisation signal directed back towards the original source of synchronisation is not itself used for synchronisation.

However, the method of the above International Standard does not cope with the situation where two adjacent NEs are connected via more than one port. Whereas a SSM of DNU will be transmitted on the first port at which the synchronisation signal is received, the second port connected to the same source of synchronisation can still output a synchronisation signal with a valid (i.e. non-DNU) SSM.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention provides a communications system comprising a plurality of interconnected network elements (NE), in which each NE comprises one or more ports, each port for inputting from an adjacent one of the plurality of NEs a synchronisation signal and a quality level indication (QLI) for indicating the quality of the source of the synchronisation signal; each port for outputting to the adjacent NE a selected one of the input synchronisation signals and a QLI; in which each NE is associated with a unique NE identifier; in which each port of each NE is associated with a source identifier (SID) for identifying the port at which each synchronisation signal is input; in which each port of each NE comprises QLI means for setting the value of the QLI output at that port based on a comparison of the SID of that port with the SID of the selected synchronisation signal input port; and in which the SID of each port comprises the NE identifier of the adjacent NE.

The present invention also provides a method for indicating the quality level of synchronisation signals in a communications system comprising a plurality of interconnected network elements (NE), in which each NE comprises one or more ports,

each port for inputting from an adjacent one of the plurality of NEs a synchronisation signal and a quality level indication (QLI) for indicating the quality of the source of the synchronisation signal; each port for outputting to the adjacent NE a selected one of the input synchronisation signals and a QLI; the method including the steps of allocating to each NE a unique identifier and allocating to each port of an NE a source identifier (SID) for identifying the port at which each synchronisation signal is input; receiving synchronisation signals at the port or ports of each NE; associating each received synchronisation signal with the SID of the port at which it is input; selecting for each NE one of the received synchronisation signals for output from the port or ports of that NE; comparing the SID associated with the selected synchronisation signal with the SID associated with each port at which that synchronisation signal is output and setting the QLI output at each port according to the result of the relevant comparison; the method including the step of setting the SID of each port to the NE identifier of the NE to which that port is directly connected.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Embodiments of the present invention will now be described by way of example with reference to the drawings in which:-

Figures 1 to 4 show a telecommunications system of the prior art;

Figure 5 shows a telecommunications system according to the present invention.

In the Figures numbers in squares denote the priority of sources of synchronisation signal received at the SE via the STM-N ports, one of which sources is selected by the SE on the basis of its quality and priority, to provide the synchronisation signal output. As

indicated in Figure 1, the West STM-N input receives a synchronisation signal with a quality level of G.811 associated with it and is allocated priority 1 as a source of synchronisation signal. The East STM-N input is allocated Priority 2. In fact, the synchronisation signal received at the East STM-N port of SE1 has been looped back at SE2 and this is reflected in the assigned SSM value DNU.

Figure 2 illustrates the problem that can arise with a synchronisation timing loop. In Figure 2 we see that the synchronisation source arriving at the West port of SE1 has failed and as a result SE1 has switched to its alternative synchronisation input at the East port. However the source of synchronisation signal at the East port has already been looped back in SE2 at its West port from the synchronisation signal previously supplied by SE1. Thus a loop is created without any reference to an external source of synchronisation with a consequent degradation of clock quality. This inferior synchronisation signal is also being propagated by SE2 via its East port with an inappropriately good SSM of G.811.

Figure 3 shows the internal working of a conventional SE in more detail. In Figure 3 each STM-N port S_1, S_2, \dots, S_N of the SE comprises a source identity (SID) generator, a DNU controller and an SSM output selector Y. The SID generator provides a unique value identifying the relevant port for accompanying the received synchronisation and SSM signals through the SE. The SID value is also passed to the DNU controller for the same STM-N port.

The selectors (T4) are shown schematically as comprising three, ganged, single-pole,

The DNU controller compares the SID of signals received from the selectors (SID_{sel}) with the SID applied directly from the local SID generator (SID_{sx}, where x=1, 2...N). If the two SID values agree then the signals received from the selectors are the same as those input to that port from the STM-N link, so in transmitting these same signals back

to the same STM-N link, a loop-back is generated. In order to alert NEs connected to this STM-N link to this state of affairs, the STM-N port outputs a DNU SSM under control of the DNU controller. The DNU controller controls the operation of the SSM output selector Y to output either the SSM value received from the selectors (SSM sel) or the DNU value, accordingly.

In the example shown in Figure 3, Port S_1 will output a Tx SSM of DNU while all other ports will present a T_x SSM derived from SSM_{S1} .

Figure 4 shows a further problem that can arise despite the use of SIDs as described above. The arrangement of Figure 4 differs from that illustrated above in that SE1 and SE2 are now interconnected via two separate ports i.e. SE1 port C to SE2 port A and SE1 port D to SE2 port B).

Whereas the mechanism described above is effective in allocating an SSM of DNU to the synchronisation signal looped back to the port at which it was received (in this case SE2 port A) it does not prevent the synchronisation signal looped back to SE1 via the second port (i.e. SE2 port B) from being allocated an inappropriate SSM (i.e. $SSM=G.811$). This looped back timing signal is then propagated by SE1 from its west ports with the inappropriate SSM value.

A characteristic of SDH systems is that, for the purposes of network planning and overall control, each network equipment is allocated a unique identification (NEID). The NEID allocated to each node is centrally stored at a network control function which acts to

control message to each SE containing instructions regarding the setting of the various SIDs for each port.

To be precise, these SIDs should now be referred to as destination identifiers (DIDs) as they determine the destination to which the synchronisation signal output at that port is directed.

In a further preferred embodiment of the present invention each network equipment is programmed on initialisation to send a message containing its own NEID to each adjacent network equipment. Each SE is also programmed, on receiving the "NEID" message from its adjacent SEs to set the values of the SIDs of its ports to the NEID value contained in the message received at that port.

In a further preferred embodiment, the SEs repeatedly send NEID messages to adjacent SEs e.g. as a background or a regularly scheduled task, thus advantageously allowing for any changes in the topology of the network to be automatically reflected in the SID allocation of the SEs affected.

Figure 5 shows application of the invention to a complex network in which multitude of SEs are interconnected. Each SE in Figure 5 is identified by its NEID which, as is normally in the case, consists of a name that is usually derived from the geographical location of the SE. The central SE comprises 7 ports P_1 to P_7 , each port is connected to a further SE and, in particular ports P_6 and P_7 , are both directly connected to SE "New Port". Each of the SEs connected to SE "Central" has further ports for connection with

other SEs (not shown). According to the invention both the ports of SE “New Port” that are directly connected to SE “Central” are given the SID “Central”. As a result, if the synchronisation signal selected by SE “New Port” is from one of the ports connected to SE “Central”, this synchronisation signal is sent out of both ports connected to SE “Central” with an SSM of DNU.

Although the above embodiments have been described with reference to SDH equipment the same techniques are equally applicable to other synchronous communications systems notably SONET systems.

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